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SUBJECT: TURKS RELIEVED THAT PRESIDENT OBAMA DID NOT SAY
"GENOCIDE," BUT REMAIN UNCOMFORTABLE WITH WHAT HE DID SAY

REF: ANKARA 565

Classified By: DCM Doug Silliman, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Reaction to the President's April 24 Armenian Remembrance Day statement was initial relief that he did not use the word "genocide," followed by deeper analysis and criticism of the words he chose to describe the events, particularly his use of the Armenian term 'Yeds Meghern' (Great Catastrophe). GOT officials said they did not accept portions of the statement regarding the descriptions of the events of history, found the portions that spoke of continuing talks with Armenia to be positive. The political opposition was stronger in its criticism of the language describing the 1915 events, and had little positive to say about the President's encouragement of Turkish-Armenian talks. The media was moderately critical, with many columnists finding something positive to mention even in their critique of the statement. END SUMMARY.

GOT REACTION

¶2. (SBU) President Gul and PM Erdogan both made remarks in reaction to the President's statement shortly after its release. Both took a measured approach, indicating that there were aspects of the statement with which they disagreed while taking heart in the President's support for Turkish-Armenian efforts to normalize their relationship. Gul's main criticisms the President's statement that he did not recognize the Turkish and Muslim loss of life during the tragic events of 1915 and he reiterated the common Turkish refrain that history should not be determined by politicians, but rather by historians. Erdogan characterized the statement as balanced, though he also noted that it does not "satisfy us". He too underlined that the issue is one for historians, not politicians, to address, emphasizing that if historians and international experts research the issue and "something negative comes out, then we will face our past". He indicated that all should avoid statements that overshadow the ongoing normalization process. Erdogan on April 27 visited the US pavilion at the IDEF defense trade show in Istanbul, but did not comment on the April 24 statement issue while talking to the press there.

13. (C) Reaction of MFA officials was mixed. In the official MFA press release, MFA stated that certain aspects of the President's statement were unacceptable, stressing that "one should not forget the fact that during that period hundreds of thousands of Turks also lost their lives". U/S Apakan, who summoned Ambassador to the ministry April 25, said Turkey recognized that President Obama did not actually use the word "genocide." However, he was concerned that the language was stronger than presidential statements in the past, and certain phrases seemed to echo UN Convention on Genocide terminology. However, despite MFA unhappiness with some of the language, Apakan noted that they saw the portion which mentions Turkey and Armenia together addressing their past and moving forward as quite positive and fits well into Turkey's ongoing efforts to normalize relations with Armenia.

His concern is that by calling upon Turkey to "acknowledge the past" the President actually means acknowledging the "American" (Armenian) view of history, which pre-judges the outcome of the independent evaluation by historians and experts the GOT hopes to achieve through the institution of a historical commission, "a centerpiece of its efforts to normalize relations with Armenia. Other senior MFA officials, however, reacted with a sense of relief, privately offering thanks that the word genocide had not been used and for the forward-looking support for the normalization process.

14. (SBU) Turkish Grand National Assembly Speaker Koksal Toptan warned that the President's statements could have a negative effect on the normalization efforts between Turkey and Armenia. However he added that Turkey is a powerful country and will continue on the path it believes to be correct, and that "one should not get stuck in such

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statements." Toptan emphasized that Turkey is ready to look at the events of 1915, but with a fair historical approach.

15. (SBU) Opposition leaders were much stronger in their criticisms, saying that what President Obama said equated the events of 1915 with genocide. CHP leader Baykal said that by using the Armenian word for the events (Yeds Meghern), the President indicated that he held the same view of history as the Armenians and Armenian Diaspora, and was not looking at history in a fair and balanced way. MHP Chairman Bahceli's remarks were similar - claiming that the Armenian word meant genocide therefore President Obama considers it to have been a genocide. He also said that PM Erdogan should reverse his path (on talks with Armenia) as soon as possible.

MEDIA REACTION

16. (U) Media outlets over the weekend were at first relieved that the word genocide was not used in the statement. Web pages for many major Turkish newspapers carried headlines "Obama did not use the word genocide." However, by April 27, press coverage was starting to turn more negative. Mainstream "Vatan" characterized the statement as stronger than past statements, while Islamist oriented "Yeni Safak's" headline "Big Reactions to the Great Catastrophe" reflected the building opinion that by using the Armenian "Meds Yerghen," Obama had in fact strongly implied the use of the verboten word. Mainstream "Milliyet" even went so far as to say, "Obama's statement was an elegant way of recognizing genocide."

17. (U) Columnists were mixed in their assessments. Some felt that President Obama's message was equivalent to an acknowledgment of genocide, yet still had something positive to say. Semih Idiz wrote in mainstream "Milliyet" that "President Obama did not pronounce the word genocide, but he meant it. On the other hand, Obama also clearly asked both Turkey and Armenia to remain committed to the normalization process." Ali Aslan in Islamist oriented "Zaman" wrote that "Obama's language in the April 24th message indicates that Turkey has lost the Armenian issue in America from the

intellectual and political perspective.... However Obama also did his best not to use the word "genocide" in his statement, which indicates a good chance that Turkey can remain committed to diplomacy." Other columnists used the opportunity to express their dissatisfaction with some of the current policies. Mehmet Barlas wrote in mainstream "Sabah": "Turkish foreign diplomacy has always been conducted under certain declared positions and any change in these positions could be interpreted as a concession... changing our positions based on world realities will only provide Turkey with better harmonization both inside and outside." Yavuz Baydar wrote in the English language daily "Today's Zaman": "Turkey has changed since the early 1990's... hopefully one day soon civilians from both sides can determine whether to call the events 'Yeds Meghern' or something else. The obsession with the rulers of this nation with one single word (genocide) is already sentenced to oblivion."

COMMENT

18. (C) Generally, Turks have reacted with a sense of relief to have avoided a showdown with the US over the use of the term "genocide." While clearly uncomfortable with the strong endorsement of the Armenian point of view in the statement, GOT officials were more pleased with his support for efforts to normalize relations with Armenia and for Turkey and Armenia to arrive at a mutually acceptable way to characterize their common history. That is the goal of the historical commission, which GOT officials have long sought as a vehicle to move forward the debate on this issue within Turkish society. GOT officials made it clear in their reactions to the President's statement they will continue to push forward the normalization effort.

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